DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 050 SE 050 699

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TITLE Microcomputers in the Science Classroom. ERIC/SMEAC Science Education Digest No. 3, 1988.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Science, Mathematics, and Environmental Education, Columbus, Ohio.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 4p.; For other 1988 science digests see SE 050 697-698.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC/SMEAC, The Ohio State University, 1200 Chambers Road, 3rd Floor, Columbus, OH 43212 ($1.00 single copy; ordered in sets by year and area, $3.00).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Computer Assisted Instruction; Computer Graphics; Computer Oriented Programs; Computer Simulation; *Computer Uses in Education; Elementary Secondary Education; *Laboratories; *Microcomputers; *Science Activities; Science Curriculum; Science Equipment; Science Experiments; *Science Instruction; Secondary Education; Secondary School Science; Sex Differences; Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest presents a brief description of some applications and findings of the microcomputer in science classrooms. It is suggested that microcomputer simulations are at least as effective as hands-on experiences for some cognitive outcomes and may in fact enhance these outcomes when the simulations are sequenced to follow hands-on instruction. Skills such as graphing appear to be positively influenced by microcomputer-based experiences, although the apparently critical nature of a delay between the input of data and its corresponding graphic display should be noted. While sex difference in achievement may not have been eliminated by the use of the microcomputer, instances of equal performance have been noted. In the affective domain, both student attitudes and interest seem to be positive regarding the use of microcomputers in science instruction. Includes 10 references. (MVL)

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SE 050 699

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MICROCOMPUTERS IN THE SCIENCE CLASSROOM

This Digest presents a brief description of some applications of the microcomputer in science classrooms. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review, rather it is a selection of information representative of recent activities.

Uses of Microcomputers

In considering current and potential uses of microcomputers, Tamir (1985/86) examines three modes of microcomputer applications: tutorial, tool, and tutee. In the tutorial mode, drill and practice is the most common use, although the tutorial function may also appear in the form of remedial programs. Tamir also includes testing as a part of the tutorial function because it is such an integral part of the science curriculum. Homework tasks similar to those described under remediation and testing represent another form of tutorial use if the homework is systematically evaluated and feedback provided (Tamir, 1985/86).

The microcomputer as a tool can serve many management, administrative, and instructional functions. In calculations and statistical analysis, an important function of microcomputers is in performing time-consuming or complex calculations, especially in those cases involving relationships of two or more variables over time. Microcomputers can also be used to perform standard statistical analyses such as frequency distributions, t-tests, Chi squares, regressions, analyses of variance and the like (Tamir 1985/86). Word processing is another important tool function of the microcomputer that represents a major time savings to both students and teacher. Not only can science reports be produced in less time, but reports generated with a word processor have been found to be better written as rated by independent raters in five categories: spelling and punctuation, organization and design, sentence structure, clarity, and overall quality (O'Brien and Pizzini, 1986). Drawing and graphics display capabilities involving the microcomputer as a sophisticated visual aid incorporating color, animation, and sound still need much exploration. The potential for combining such graphic cues with other forms of instruction would seem to be promising.

Data accumulation and processing represent still other tool functions. The microcomputer can be used to collect, analyze and display data in the form of graphs and charts, showing relationships that change as the values of the variables change. The interactive capability of the microcomputer makes possible problem solving and decision making applications. In some programs students identify variables, define hypotheses, determine methods of measurement, treatments, procedures, and proposed techniques of data analyses. Data drawn from research can be stored in the computer's memory so that students can process and examine the data, test predictions, and draw conclusions. Simulations and games can allow the students to examine models and relationships of the real world under controlled conditions, to study variables which might otherwise be inaccessible. This capability of the microcomputer to provide models of scientific phenomena or systems has significant potential for science teaching (Tamir, 1985/86).

The microcomputer as tutee is different in both kind and emphasis from the tutorial and tool functions. In the latter cases, the student uses the microcomputer as an aid to learning, with communication in the student's language. In the tutee function, the student "teaches" the microcomputer, using the computer's language. Perhaps a more important difference is in the nature of the task. In the tutorial and tool modes, the student is attempting to learn by using existing programs. In the tutee mode, the student attempts to clarify a problem in order to communicate it effectively to the computer. To be successful, then, requires that the student come to understand the problem that is to be "taught" to the computer. Much more work is needed on the effect and potential of this mode (Tamir 1985/86).

A survey of science microcomputer programs conducted by Caprico and Brown (1985/86) revealed that 73 percent of the software programs were related to the physical sciences. Chemistry and physics tied at 38 percent; general physical science programs suitable for 9th and 10th grade courses were less common (24 percent). Fewer than 1 percent of the physical science programs were suitable for middle school aged children, grades 7-8. Only 23 percent of all programs were suitable for non-college bound students. Most programs in the physical sciences were drill and practice (52 percent), problem solving programs ranked second (28 percent), simulations ranked third (15 percent), and tutorial programs were fourth (5 percent). In the biological sciences, drill and practice programs were the most common type (34 percent), problem solving programs were next (31 percent), tutorial programs ranked third (26 percent), and simulation programs were fourth (8 percent). Fourteen percent of the biological programs reviewed were suitable for grades 7-8. Earth-space science accounted for only 4 percent of all science education software. Thirty-five percent of the earth-space science software was suitable for junior high school students; however, of this percentage, there were no tutorials and 85 percent of the programs were drill and practice. Of the earth-space software overall, drill and practice was most common (40 percent), followed in rank by problem solving (34 percent), with tutorials and simulations tied (13 percent each). It appears that most of the existing science education software is drill and practice, related to the physical sciences, and designed for high school students, especially those students who are college-bound.

Effectiveness of Microcomputers

Some examples of recent research on the effectiveness of the microcomputer in the science classroom will be briefly summarized.

The effects of alternative ways of using microcomputer simulations on the achievement and attitudes of sixth- and seventh-grade science students were studied by Shaw and Okey (1985). Nine classes were randomly assigned to one of four treatments: (1) microcomputer simulations, (2) laboratory activities, (3) a combination of simulations and laboratory activities (simulations presented first), and (4) conventional instruction. Topics covered during lessons included the process skills of observing, hypothesizing, testing, classifying, and recording data. Results showed that laboratory activities, simulations, and a combination of these two strategies yielded higher achievement than did conventional instruction; there were no significant differences in achievement among the non-conventional treatment groups; and there was no attitude differences among the four groups. It was also found that students at middle and high levels of logical reasoning outachieved students at the low level of logical reasoning ability.

The effectiveness of supplementing teaching of the volume displacement concept to ninth grade students with an interactive computer simulation was examined by DeClercq and Gennaro (1987).

After completion of the regular text materials, demonstrations, and experiments on volume displacement, the randomly assigned experimental group received an additional 10-20 minutes of instruction on the concept using an interactive computer simulation. A posttest administered 55 days later revealed that the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group, suggesting that computer simulated experiments may be effective adjuncts to the science curriculum.

In a related study dealing with the same concept, Choi and Genarro (1987) compared the effectiveness of microcomputer simulated experiences with parallel hands-on laboratory activities. Sex was included as an independent variable in this study. Retention after 45 days was compared for the two treatment groups. It was found that computer simulated experiences were as effective as hands-on laboratory experiences and that males who had hands-on experiences performed better on the posttest than did females who had hands-on experiences. There was no difference in scores of males and females who had had computer simulated experiences or in retention scores when comparing hands-on and computer simulated experience groups. However, males in both treatment groups retained knowledge of volume displacement better than did females.

Hands-on activities and computer simulation methods in chemistry were examined by Bourque and Carlson (1987) to compare the cognitive effectiveness of a traditional hands-on laboratory exercise with a computer-simulated program on the same topic, and to determine if coupling these formats into a specific sequence would provide optimum student comprehension. Three laboratory experiments (acid-base titration, determination of the equilibration constant of a weak acid, and determination of Avogadro's number) were designed to correspond to three computer simulations. The data indicated that the hands-on activities produced higher scores for the acid-base titration and for the ionzation constant, and no significant difference for the determination of Avogadro's number. The results further showed, however, that the highest cumulative scores were achieved for the format of hands-on experience followed by the computer simulation for the first two experiments, but there was no apparent advantage in sequence of performance for the derivation of Avogadro's number.

Mokros and Tinker (1987) reported on the impact of microcomputer-based labs (MBL) on children's ability to interpret graphs. In a longitudinal study, seventh- and eighth-grade students worked with MBL units on illusions, heat and temperature, sound, and motion for a minimum of 20 class sessions. The data indicated that there was a significant change in students' ability to interpret and use graphs (an effect size of 81 percent). Four reasons were suggested why MBL appears to be such a powerful vehicle for teaching graphing skills: MBL uses multiple modalities (e.g., physical manipulation of materials plus visual graphic display); it instantly pairs events with their symbolic representation (e.g., a graph created and displayed while a student is using a temperature probe); it provides genuine scientific experiences (students gather and analyze real data); and it eliminates the drudgery of graph production.

Brasell (1987) studied the effect of a very brief MBL treatment with a kinematics unit on high school physics students' ability to translate between a physical event and the graphic representation of it, and the effect of real-time graphing as opposed to delayed graphing of data. Overall posttest scores from the treatment in which the graphs were displayed in real-time were significantly higher than scores from all other treatment groups. The evidence showed that a single class period was sufficient for high school physics students to improve their comprehension of distance and velocity graphs when compared with a paper-and-pencil control treatment. Most of the improvement (90 percent) was attributable to real-time graphing. A delay of only 20-30 seconds in displaying the graphed data inhibited nearly all the learning.

Computer simulations used by high school biology students in attempts to enhance their problem solving skills were studied by Rivers and Vockell (1987). The simulations were administered under two conditions: guided discovery, and unguided discovery; a control group received no simulations. The results indicated that: (a) students using the simulations met the unit objectives at least as well as the control students, and (b) the students using the guided simulations surpassed the other students on subsequent simulation pretests, on tests of scientific thinking, and on a test of critical thinking. The evidence suggested that students using the computerized simulations were developing generalizable problem solving strategies which transferred to novel settings.

Summary

The microcomputer clearly has many possible applications in the science classroom. It is equally clear that we have just begun to tap the potential of the microcomputer in education. Recognizing the tentative nature of the research findings in the field, some implications for science instruction emerge. It appears that microcomputer simulations are at least as effective as hands-on experiences for some cognitive outcomes and may in fact enhance these outcomes when the simulations are sequenced to follow hands-on instruction. Skills such as graphing appear to be positively influenced by microcomputer-based experiences, although the apparently critical nature of a delay between the input of data and its corresponding graphic display should be noted. While sex differences in achievement may not have been eliminated by the use of the microcomputer, instances of equal performance have been noted; this bears further investigation. In the affective domain, both student attitudes and interest seem to be positive regarding the use of microcomputers in science instruction. There are many encouraging indicators but much remains to be understood.

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